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Racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related forms of intolerance, follow-up and implementation of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action

Written statement* submitted by Servas International, a non-governmental organization on the roster

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[15 February 2016]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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One of the greatest challenges of our times

Throughout the year 2015/ 2016 the refugee crisis turned into one of the greatest challenges of our times. As an organization working towards lasting global peace and understanding through host and traveler programs all over the world, Servas International (SI) is deeply concerned about the human rights situation for those people taking the long, dangerous trail into Europe, as well as about the rising xenophobia, racism and divisions related to the crisis. At the same time, it is also crucial to understand the sources of the crisis, as countries have to acknowledge and address their role in fuelling conflicts.

The crisis in numbers

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM) the number of migrants and refugees reaching Europe has reached 1.011.712 in 2015. The vast majority arrived by sea but about 34,000 made their way over land via Turkey. Winter has not stemmed the flow of people - with 83.201 people reaching Europe by sea since the start of 2016.[1]

The direct routes however are fraught with danger. The dramatic death toll on the Mediterranean was a shocking total of 3770 people in 2015. A number of 410 have already been declared dead/ missing by 12 February 2016[2]. The UNHCR's Chief spokesperson Melissa Fleming said that one in three people arriving in January 2016 were children, as compared to 1 in 10 in September 2015.[3]

The vast majority of migrants arrive in Europe via Greece, 853,650 people arriving in 2015.[4] The huge number of arrivals and the scale of the crisis have put huge pressures on the country. There is virtually no infrastructure to cope with the number of people arriving, leaving local volunteers providing vital assistance.[5]

Findings by Servas volunteers

To help manage the influx of people arriving on the Greek Islands, civil society organizations and hundreds of individual volunteers have stepped in, including local residents. Several Servas volunteers from different countries have been on the ground in Greece and also at the Macedonian border. They noted that tensions are increasing between Turkey and Greece, struggling to cope with the refugee influx.

Servas volunteers found that especially unofficial camps such as the Moria camp for non-Syrian refugees in Lesbos are in particular need of support. The camp is made up of people with a mix of cultures from so-called non-war-torn countries who are not to be sent for registration to Athens since many of them are considered as economic refugees. Therefore, it takes much longer for those men, women and children to be processed and given the right to move on.

A Syrian camp is nearby, and is a very well-organized, tightly controlled, UN-run facility. For unofficial camps like Moria there is however little to no UN or official organized work being done at this camp. The work is done by very dedicated volunteers from various small relief organizations. Thousands of refugees in this camp are hoping for a chance to a better life and the full enjoyment of their economic, social and cultural rights.

Refugees and international law

The right to life has crucial importance both for individuals and for society as a whole and is the supreme right from which no derogation is permitted even in times of emergencies. Similarly, the principles of equality and non-discrimination are fundamental to international human rights law.

The 1951 Refugee Convention[6] is the key legal document of today's international refugee protection. It recognized the international scope of refugee crises and the need for international cooperation and responsibility sharing among states.

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[1] http://www.iom.int/

[2] http://missingmigrants.iom.int/mediterranean-arrivals-migrants-including-asylum-seekers-top-83000-2016

[3] http://www.unhcr.org/56bdf0f26.html

[4] http://missingmigrants.iom.int/mediterranean-arrivals-migrants-including-asylum-seekers-top-83000-2016

[5] http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-24583286

[6] http://www.unhcr-centraleurope.org/pdf/resources/conventions/refugee-convention/1951-refugee-convention-questions-and-answers.html

Although, initially, the 1951 Convention was more or less limited to protecting European refugees in the aftermath of World War II, the 1967 Protocol expanded its scope and removed its geographical and temporal restrictions, turning the Convention into a truly universal instrument, as the problem of displacement has spread around the world.
The 145 States Parties to the Convention should respect their obligations and in particular EU members States should act accordingly and urgently. They must ensure that their response to dangerous boat migration are fully in line both with international law and place a human rights perspective at the center of efforts to respond to the crisis.

Finding safe and legal channels into the EU
In December 2015 the High Commissioner for Refugees, António Guterres, said: "Forced displacement is now profoundly affecting our times. It touches the lives of millions of our fellow human beings .... Never has there been a greater need for tolerance, compassion and solidarity with people who have lost everything."[7]

For Servas, one of the main concerns therefore is the EU asylum policy, forcing people to resort to smugglers and risking their lives in appalling conditions instead of travelling legally to safety. All refugees should be allowed to apply for visas from EU embassies or special centers (like those in Lesbos) from Turkey (or anywhere outside the EU). Those whose application has been rejected should then be promptly informed about the legal status of their application in order to prevent them from taking the dangerous road to Europe by sea. Those others, whose application is approved, should be allowed to travel legally and safely to their destination.
Similar statements have been made by UNHCR's Chief spokesperson Melissa Fleming in February 2016 who said "Within the context of the necessary reduction of dangerous sea arrivals, safe access to seek asylum [...], is a fundamental human right that must be protected and respected",[8] and also by organizations such as Human Rights Watch, which stated that "ways must be found to increase safe and legal channels into the EU, including by implementing generous resettlement programs [...] , and increasing the number of humanitarian visas."[9]

Refugees and racism
Ever since the beginning of the refugee crisis antimigrant sentiments and practices have been on the rise, particularly in Germany, where the number of attacks against asylum centers has tripled within the past year. While Germany now has the largest refugee influx since World War II, already from January to July 2015 over 200 cases where refugees and migrants have been subjected to hate crimes such as arson, vandalism and violence, have been reported.[10]
The political divide over the refugee crisis and the increasingly aggressive rhetoric are of great concern. On 14 October 2015 UNHCR Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein Zeid warned that the dehumanizing language used by some European politicians has echoes of the 1938 summit before Holocaust and that some European politicians have descended into "xenophobia and in some cases outright racism".[11]

"One wonders what has happened to Europe. Why is there so much amnesia? Why don't they properly distil from their experience that they've been down this road before and it's a very unhappy road if you continue to follow it," Zeid said.
The Durban Declaration has recognized that xenophobia against non-nationals, including migrants, constitutes one of the main sources of contemporary racism and that there are frequent and widespread human rights violations against members of such groups.[12] It is therefore far past time to work on real integrational approaches to the refugee crisis and for the EU to harmonize its asylum policy.

Racism and antimigrant sentiments are in dire opposition to Servas International's goals to facilitate dialogue between nations and promote international understanding. Interaction between human beings must play an essential role in overcoming cultural barriers, as it is also essential to search for integrational approaches to the crisis and provide practical help.

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[7] http://www.unhcr.org/5672c98c34.html
[8] http://www.unhcr.org/56bdf0f26.html
[9] https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/06/19/mediterranean-migration-crisis/why-people-flee-what-eu-should-do
[10] http://speisa.com/modules/articles/index.php/item.1822/violent-attacks-against-immigrants-exploding-in-germany.html
[11] http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/refdaily?pass=52fc6fbd5&id=561f4ba55
[12] http://www.un.org/en/letsfightracism/migrants.shtml

Addressing the source of the crisis

Despite promises to rein weapons exports, European governments are still struggling to kick their addiction to war profits. A report released in October 2015 showed that the value of Germany's arms sales leapt to 3.5 billion Euros in the first six months in the past year[13] - compared to 2.2 billion Euros in the first half of 2014. Critics say one doesn't need to look further for the root of the crisis.

It is clear that foreign interests and weapons exports fuel wars, which in turn forces people to flee their countries and to become refugees in the very same countries that sold the weapons. Proactive approaches therefore should include preventing conflicts from happening in the first place. The heart-wrenching refugee crisis unfolding at European borders must lead to a much needed conversation on those factors causing the instability that is driving people from their homes.

Conclusion

The refugee crisis is showing the human cost of war and conflict. Responsibility for solving the crisis and protecting human rights must be extended far beyond politics.

A human rights approach to migration must be found that places the migrant at the center of migration policies. Migrants must be included in relevant national action plans, including the provision of public housing and national strategies to combat racism and xenophobia.

Instead of further contributing to the controversy, Servas International will continue to respond to the crisis by pursuing its peace mission of facilitating the coming together of hosts and travelers of any race, creed, sexual orientation, class/caste or nationality. It will stand strongly against racism, work on integrational approaches and provide humanitarian help.

[13] http://www.dw.com/en/weapons-go-to-conflict-zones-the-money-comes-to-germany/a-18798104